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## **Xi Jinping's 2.0 version of the “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan”**

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## Xi Jinping's 2.0 version of the “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan”

(800-1500)

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On January 2, 2019 Xi Jinping held a speech, meant to commemorate the famous “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan” of 1979; in it, he defined unification across the Taiwan Strait, as “the great trend of history,” and warned that attempts to facilitate Taiwan’s independence would be met by force; he also called for “unification under the ‘[one country, two systems’ formula](#)” - Beijing’s solution for governing Taiwan after a potential unification with the mainland - signaling important changes in China’s Taiwan Policy.

Needless to say, Xi’s speech stirred up quite a reaction across the Strait.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen immediately condemned the speech and after being sworn in for the second time responded that “[Taiwan will never accept the proposed formula](#)”, which the majority of Taiwanese oppose.

What Xi’s speech clearly illustrates, is that the issue of ‘re-unifying’ the island with the motherland, as Beijing puts it, represents a long-standing unfinished business for the People’s Republic of China. Different generations of leaders have appealed to the Taiwanese public, through epistolary communication, in order to bring closure and find a solution acceptable to the PRC.

This is best embodied in the several versions of the “[Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan](#)” (告台灣同胞書), a series of official documents, released by the Chinese government, regarding the “Taiwan Problem” between 1958 and 1979, addressing Taiwanese people and lobbying for unification.

In retrospect these letters, convey an interesting first-hand account of the evolution of the CCP’s rhetorical approach in narrating Cross-Strait relations, solidifying the narrative around the concept of the existence of “One China” in the world, Taiwan being an integral part of it.

## **The 1979 version of the “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan”**

Nearly 21 years later, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (SCNPC), the legislative body of the PRC, [issued another message to the “Taiwanese Compatriots” on January 1, 1979](#). Packaged as a New Year’s address, this letter for the first time uses the word “reunification” while dropping the well-known slogan regarding the “liberation of Taiwan” (我們一定要解放台灣) that had been frequently used in the PRC since the 1950s and was present in all the previous letters. The 1979 letter exhibits an unprecedented tone of confidence, which has to be understood in light of the international situation at the time; in fact, in 1971 the PRC entered the world stage and the ROC was forced to withdraw from it, due to its expulsion from the United Nations in that same year. On December 15, 1978, United States’ President Jimmy Carter announced an agreement between the US and the PRC to recognize each other and to establish diplomatic relations, starting from January 1, 1979.

In a highly symbolical move for the PRC, the letter was published on the [frontpage of the People’s Daily](#), next to a celebratory note regarding the new US - PRC relationship.

In this version of the letter the emphasis is placed on the perpetuation of the injustices suffered by China, at the hands of foreign powers. The powerful *leitmotif* of subordination, resentment and anger frequently found in social commentary and political discourse, referring to the dismemberment of China’s territory, is crystallized in the attempt to provide legitimacy to what the PRC authorities call “re-unification”, making use of historical narratives, claiming that “Taiwan has been an inalienable part of China since ancient times” (台灣自古就是中國不可分割的一部分).

## **The 2019 version of the “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan”**

In 2019, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered his own version of the “Letter to Compatriots in Taiwan” in the form of a speech, commemorating the 1979 version. From 1979 to 2019, four decennial commemorations of the “Letter” have taken place.

In his speech, Xi strongly asserts that there is only one solution to the “Taiwan Problem” – this being “reunification with the motherland” followed by his own “Five Points” (習五條) – urging Taiwan to accept the “one country, two systems” model, as previously implemented in Hong Kong and Macau. Although Xi is the first CCP leader to ‘update’ the letter since 1979, Xi’s “five points” draw their origin in the repertoire of past CCP leaders such as Hu Jintao and Jiang

Zemin. In other words, a large part of Xi's letter—including known statements such as “unification is inevitable” and “we will not rule out the use of force”—is actually a mere revisitation of old tropes, which can be traced back to Mao Zedong's times.

The message has three goals: reasserting Xi's power by gaining international attention; asserting his views for a speedy resolution of the Taiwan issue; and lastly, showing his prowess and increased control of media outlets and channels of communication within China. In fact, since his tenure started, [Xi has called for the creation of new supervisory agencies](#) and organs in charge of cyber security and internet surveillance as well as issued stricter regulations regarding the content of newspapers' and television reports.

Xi's intent to make China “great” again, a fundamental component of the [China Dream](#), becomes intensified by the sense of grandeur evoked by state media and broadcasters concerning the commemorative anniversary of the letter. In addition to the live broadcast aired by multiple CCTV-run regional and overseas channels, the event transcript and the full script of Xi's speech were posted on state-run websites (xinhua.net; cpcnews.cn; people.cn) and embedded in *weibo* posts and *weixin* messages as well as in other social media platforms.

The theme of the 1979 and 2019 messages is related: only as a unified country can China regain its rightful position in the world and become a true global hegemon. While the 1979 version of the letter denotes that all Chinese, whether they be on mainland China or Taiwan, “have a compelling responsibility for the survival, growth and prosperity of the Chinese nation”, in its modern-day version of 2019, [Xi links the China Dream to the Taiwanese](#), blaming those who refuse to re-unify with the motherland, for holding China back, hampering it from achieving the long-awaited dream of national rejuvenation.

### **Taiwan's reaction to the letter**

In calling unification across the Taiwan Strait as “the great trend of history,” Xi warned both Taiwan as well as the international community, [that attempts to facilitate Taiwan's independence would be met by force](#). In mentioning the ‘one country, two systems’ formula, however, he appears to have overestimated the importance of the island's November 2018 local elections in which the ruling Democratic Progressive Party took a bad hit, losing several posts around Taiwan. In fact, on top of sparking a huge backlash in Taiwan, Xi's speech actually pushed its citizens to rally compact behind President Tsai. This evolution took place gradually,

over the course of a few months. During this time a series of events brought the Taiwanese to vote for the DPP, seeing the ‘China Threat’ as an increasingly closer reality, with a great potential to impact the island’s national sovereignty.

In fact, Xi’s speech in January 2019 was merely the first of a series of events, which would soon follow, including the Anti-Extradition Law Amendments Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests in Hong Kong later in 2019, which contributed to a resurgence in popularity for Tsai, who ultimately won the Presidential Elections in January 2020.

Toward its final stages, the Taiwanese Presidential election campaign ran on the deep-seated fears towards the growing influence of authoritarian China over Hong Kong as well as Taiwan’s future.

As Xi Jinping seeks to strengthen his reputation [ahead of the 20th Party Congress](#) (中國共產黨第二十次全國代表大會), in 2022, he has taken a number of coercive steps against Taiwan. Over the last three years there has been a sharp increase in CCP’s influence operations methods to [target the Taiwanese population via online media](#); [through coercive trade methods](#); and by [weaponizing \(withholding\) COVID-19 vaccine against the Taiwanese](#).

All these are becoming increasingly dangerous fronts of novel tensions in Cross-Strait diplomacy that stand for stormy weather ahead.